

A QUICK TRIP AROUND BRITAIN

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London

I arrived jet lagged and constipated and I stayed that way on and off for 10 days. On arriving at Immigration, EU citizens went through in a flash, while Other Passports queued up in a large room that was hot stuffy and packed to the doors with a never ending zigzag queue. As we shuffled along a metre every few minutes it was so pleasing to see immigration officers leaving their booths to have a quiet stroll or a chat with colleagues, while we shuffled away at their pleasure. Returning via Australian Immigration took 5 minutes with a new automated process,



Our hotel was the very convenient Grosvenor, splendid on the outside but only adequate on the inside, except for a very good and cheap bistro, but convenient because it was next door to Victoria Station, and Underground, Victoria Coach Station just down the road, and the depot the Hop-On Hop-Off bus. We had had excellent experiences with HO/HO in Dublin and Paris. But not in London.

They issued different maps from time to time and our carefully planned route was now different routes and different times. They ran every 15-20 mins, so they said, but not in the event. It took 2 ½ hrs to get from St Pauls Cathedral to Victoria and that was after an hour's wait for the bus. Maybe the problem was horrendous London traffic, which renders HO/HO a poor choice .

But at least we saw St Paul's, a first for both of us. Wonderfully inspiring, huge, but no photos allowed. Truly a work of genius, to replace old St Paul's conventional Gothic which went in the Great Fire with this continental baroque work. We explored the dome: 257 steps to the whispering gallery where Catherine and I could chat while separated by the 300 ft diameter of the circular gallery. 376 steps from the floor took us outside the base of the dome but with renovations going on we couldn't see very much. So to the top of the dome, which is 528 steps from the bottom. A pleasing physical feat but struggling up in ever decreasing circles was a disturbing sensation. We found with the Eiffel Tower that the higher you go, the more roofs recede anonymously into the distance and the less impressive becomes the view. Not so here with London's more varied topology, the Thames winding eastwards. To climb to the very top of the cross on the dome, which you can't, would be 365 feet from the ground, one foot for every day of the year, which was very clever of Christopher Wren.



While on Cathedrals we cross the Millenium Bridge to Southbank, the Globe theatre, the Anchor Inn and Southwark Cathedral. St Saviour's Parish church goes back to the 7th century, and was refounded in 1106, it became Southward Cathedral in 1905. This was very nostalgic for me when in 1959-60 I



was a member of Southwark Cathedral choir. After choir practice we adjourned to the Anchor, where the stunning hostess, Jean, who had a cloud of curly, fair hair, huge blue eyes, a lovely face, a low cut sweater underneath which was a luscious body Rubens would have killed for to lay down on canvas: before getting around to painting her, that is. And Jean could pull a mean pint. The anchor today is very up

market, Jean alas long departed, the ancient pissoir by the Thames where we used to unload pints of micturated bitter ale, gone.

Then of course Westminster Abbey, our self guided tour as with St Pauls used radio apps, steering us around explaining the multitude of tombs and memorial to famous people. I was particularly interested in Handel's tomb for the coronation of George II: he composed Zadok the priest with its lengthy introduction to burst into "Zadok the priest ..." just as the king entered from the long nave to the place for coronation, perfectly timed. Most impressive was the Henry VII chapel at the East End with wonderful fan vaulting. Unfortunately no photographs were allowed, so here is a painting by Canaletto instead. Adjacent is the more humble St Margaret's Westminster which is the parish church for Westminster, used especially by politicians to inspire them in their secular business of governing the country. The Roman Catholic Westminster Cathedral is just a short walk down Victoria Street in a very different style, Early Christian Byzantine in bricks matching surrounding housing. Compared to the Abbey, especially as a Roman Catholic job, it is quiet spare inside, but it has a lift to take you to the top to admire the view.



It happened that we were there for the Trooping of the Colour, 15 mins walk from our hotel. We grabbed a place in the crowd against the fence of Buckingham Palace. A very pleasant young policemen had to stand a metre away, facing us. Poor chap was highly embarrassed particularly when higher ranks took time off time bully him for not standing straight. After a long hot wait, the action started. But we were at the wrong end of the action. The highlight for us was watching a row of splendid horses' bums. As opposed to when he just happened along a couple of years ago: a sight to warm the cockles of our republican hearts. .

Leeds Castle, SE Coast

Victoria Bus Station, from which departed huge numbers of buses in a welter of chaos was just down the street from our hotel. We had prebooked two tours, both starting from Gates 16-20. However not only did all tours leave from gate 19 they left at the same time. It was third world: Pushing our way through differently heading crowds, and stepping carefully to avoid a puddle of vomit, we finally boarded our coach for Leeds Castle, which is nowhere near Leeds, then on to Dover and Canterbury. After getting the gates right, the next advice to anyone contemplating a long distance coach ride is to bring your winter woollies: once we got going, on every coach we rode on, the air con was blasting. Bitter protests from huddled, shivering passengers produced a temporary effect, but the subarctic default kicked in quickly. Why?

Leeds Castle is said to be the most beautiful in Europe. It has been a Norman stronghold, the private property of six of England's medieval Queens and a palace used by Henry VIII. In the 1930s the castle was a playground for the rich and famous, as Lady Annie Baillie became the last private owner. She was fabulously wealthy, as she was one of the several aristocrats families who originally had status but no money who married American tycoons who had money but no status. A perfect match. She redid the castle thoroughly so today it is like visiting a stately home not a historic castle.



The bus took us shivering sufferers to Dover to overlook the white cliffs and gun emplacements that were so vital during WW2.

Thence to Canterbury, a very pretty town dominated by the Cathedral. Unfortunately it was being thoroughly renovated so the much vaunted gobsmacking view of the magnificent ceiling on entry was denied us. But a splendid sight still. The theme was the Beckett murder, symbolised by this complex sculpture: representing the scalping of Beckett, the swords used, and the crucifixion.



We drove back to London via Greenwich, an upmarket suburb where Greenwich Palace once stood, and where Henry VIII and his daughters Mary and Elizabeth were born. Later the site was chosen by Sir Christopher Wren for the Royal Observatory, commissioned in 1675 by King Charles II; Wren designed the original, the foundation stone being laid on 10 August. Greenwich Observatory played a major role in the history of astronomy and navigation, and is best



known as the location of the prime meridian, which gave its name to Greenwich Mean Time. There is a museum, a replica of the Cutty Sark and a music and dance school. We return to London by boat, not unfortunately the one pictured.



The Cotswolds

The next tour was to a part of the Cotswolds – mostly in Gloucestershire, too far west to take in Midsomer Murders country. On the way through West London we see the burnt out Grenfell building. First stop Bibury so called because the River Coln divides the village into two. The nineteenth-century artist William Morris called Bibury ‘the most beautiful village in England’ when he visited it. The Bi literally means the village is in two halves. One half contains very photogenic cottages, the other half a trout farm and the Swan Inn, all very lovely.



To Burford for a passable pub lunch washed down with real ale, that warm hoppy brew that slips down unnoticed until the pint glass is empty. A pleasant town to walk around. The church reminds us that the town was very rich as a cloth centre – the cemetery celebrates this with bales of stone on some of the graves. Then to Bourton-on-Water with its model village and car museum, neither of which we visited. We ended up in the pleasant nothingness of Stow-on-Wold which is on a hill, Wold means hill, but it has a line of shops at one of which I bought my grandson a model train.

You might have thought we would have had enough by now of coach travel but we had prebooked a 5 day tour so off went in blistering heat to a round tour up the East coast to Edinburgh than across, down the West, and back to London.

Stratford, York, Edinburgh, Gretna Green, the Lakes, Ludlow, Liverpool, Cardiff

Stratford was interesting because of the Bard but we weren’t given maps of the highlights so after visiting the house where Shakespeare was born we thought that was it and wasted our time at the riverside. Just a couple of blocks up we found out were a dozen houses associated with Shakespeare



or his friends such as Richard Field friend of Shakespeare's father, the hosue of his daughter Judith Quiney, her father-in-law Richard Quiney friend July Shaw, Thomas Nash, his school the King Edward the 6th Grammar school, and several more. The layout of the town has changed little since Shakespeare's time

On the way to York, we passed a splendid looking pile in the distance: Derby Castle. Hint: my camera takes 7MB images which is a pest for adjusting, but means you can crop large amounts and still get a passable image. We arrived in York shivering, spreading our limbs like cormorants to thaw out in the considerable heat. The Jorvik Centre is devoted to the Vikings, York having been under Danelaw for centuries. We were walked through The Shambles which meant a row of butchers, the blood ran down the centre of the street to collect in a drain at the bottom. The butcherds' table were called 'shamels' and as they were always a mess, 'shambles' enters the English language. Unfortunately we saw the Minster only from the outside but were duly awed. Opposite is St Michael le Belfry. We walked along the wall to Clifford castle, the remaining keep of York



castle conveniently opposite to our hotel. It was built as a motte and bailey, high on a motte or hill, with the bailey or keep inside. The Castle was built originally on the orders of William I to dominate the then Viking city of York. The castle suffered a tumultuous early history before developing into a major fortification with extensive water defences. A major explosion in 1684 rendered the remaining military defences uninhabitable, but the Castle continued to be used as a jail and prison until 1929. It now offers splendid views over the city, with the famous York Folk Museum just below.

On the way to Edinburgh we pass the Angel of the North, a controversial metal statue at Tyneside, through lovely country side to the Scottish border. We pass the



handsome Leaderfoot aqueduct over the River Tweed and so to Edinburgh. I try to take shots through the bus window of Edinburgh scenes but not very good. We stop at Holyrood Palace at Canongate and we look up to Arthur's Seat . We have little time so we go up the Royal Mile to Edinburgh Castle, where the Tattoo is held. The



Hub is the starting point for the Castle, along which are many touristy things including The Scotch Whisky Experience, which we experience. The bar there is scientific in its approach to tasting, an eyedropper being used to add water until the mix is just right. We purchase very nice Scottish woollen goods and whisky.

That evening at a palace called Prestonfield, designed by Willian Bruce who also designed Holyrood Palace, we are met by an enormous laird called Cameron Goodall. He and his team gave us an



evening of Scottish silliness. Cammy started with praise to haggis: a sheep's stomach stuffed with oats and lamb's offal, liver heart (not lungs any more) whisky soaked raisons and boiled for 2-3 hours. In fact it was excellent. Other Scottish food is not so excellent. In the coach going back to our hotel into a glorious sunset our guide Rory

told us the Scots have a sweet tooth and an addiction to deep fried food. Any deep fried café will batter and deep fry whatever you like. We were told that a battered Mars bar best combines deep frying with wonderful sweetness.

Gretna Green is just over the border, once the scene of shot gun marriages. The English law demanded consent from both families up to the age of 21: this was to protect the wealth of a family in the event that a son or daughter of a rich family was misguided enough to fall in love with someone of the lower and more impecunious orders. The Scottish law allowed marriage from the age of 12 and no parental consent. So socially mismatched English couples would go over the border to the local blacksmith, who was authorised to marry couple by placing the ringed fingers on top of each other and join with alight tap of his hammer. Done. Married. Our stay in Gretna Green was more prosaic: to attend to a different call from nature. And to pose under enormous love hands.



We sped southward through the Lakes District much too fast. We stopped for a photo op at Thirlmere and spotted one of the rare Scottish long necked sheep. At Grasmere we view Wordsworth's grave and his Dove Cottage. He actually made a pile with his poetry, became Poet Laureate and never wrote any other poetry after but lived in a mansion nearby by. Dove Cottage however is his signature domicile. We were running late, so we miss Windermere and that was that for the Lake District.



Liverpool

We didn't have time in Liverpool either, basically overnighing there. The weather was dull, photos especially those shot from the bus not up to much. The theme of our brief tour was Liverpool's greatest contribution to British culture, not Sir George Gilbert Scott's Liverpool Cathedral, built in 1902 completed much later, but ... the Beatles. First a quick look around. The impression of Liverpool is a dull working class city but there are very rich houses built in Victorian times. Liverpool's pride, apart from the Beatles, are its two football teams, Liverpool and Everton, each



backed by half the city. This presents big problems for the colour of wheelie bins: half wanted red for Liverpool team and half wanted blue. The Council solved this problem by using both – hence Liverpool's purple bins. Another quirky thing are the suitcase statues, created by John King in 1997. They are models of Liverpool's famous who went travelling, including Arthur Askey, Sir George Scott, and many others including John

Lennon and George Harrison. Which brings us to the theme point of the tour. First Penny Lane where Paul McCartney lived: he knew it well and of course the song Penny Lane is a trip along same, which is what we did, ending in Sgt. Pepper's Bistro. Back to the city centre to the Cavern pub and for a stroll along the waterfront –what is this? A yellow submarine placed



indelicately beside another Liverpool icon, the sinking Titanic. The waterfront has some nice Victorian and modern buildings and finally a rather depressing view from our hotel window.,

Chester, Ludlow Cardiff



Close to Liverpool but a world away in ambience is Chester. Chester is a walled city and we entered on the Bridge Gate sporting a large Victorian clock. We look down on the town and then follow the wall to an old Norman Bridge over the River Dee. The Romans built two amphitheatres, the second in 3rd Century and



was the largest in Britain holding 7,000 audience. Here is a statue of a lion winning his bout. Chester is famous for its half-timbered houses and the town hall. And especially its cathedral.

Our next stop for lunch and comfort is Ludlow in Shropshire. Very conservative we are told. Indeed there is a law still in force since medieval times during the Owen Glendower revolt in Wales, saying it is lawful to kill any Welshmen you see in Ludlow after sunset.



Fortunately modern laws of murder over-ride that one although it is still in the books. Ludlow Caste dates from the 11th century and was an important centre for Richard Duke of York during the Wars of the Roses. Henry VIIIth's brother Arthur honeymooned here with Catherine of Aragon: officially it was disastrous as a honeymoon, so Henry made us all believe, so he could marry Catherine himself.

Today it offers splendid views across the countryside and Ludlow's parish church.

We hasten south passing through Hereford and the beautiful Wye Valley, scene of a very wet canoe trip I took in 1958. A quick shot of Hereford Cathedral through the bus window which as you can see might be making an important theological point: the bus's "Emergency Exit" sign is stamped on the Cathedral Tower.

So to Cardiff in late afternoon, our hotel right at the end of a mall. We were overwhelmed with thousands of Welsh, singing, drinking and eating, often all three simultaneously. On asking what that was all about it was because a Robbie Williams was performing at the Millennium Stadium. Robin



Williams I could understand but Robbie? Who was he? At any rate people were having a whale of a time, as it were. At the end of the street was Cardiff Castle with an original Norman keep but most of it is fantasy built by the Marquis of Bute who made so much money out of Glamorgan coal and having no family he donated to the people of Cardiff

a Victorian's idea of a romantic mediaeval castle – not quite as fantastic as Ludwig II's Neuschwanstein castle in Bavaria but along those lines. Our guide suggested we not waste what little time we had on a Disneyland feature. We got as far as St John's church at the end of the street and no further. After much trouble was found a self-styled Welsh restaurant and ordered the Welsh lamb. Very good but no different really from Tasmanian lamb. We ordered welsh rarebit as a side dish for authenticity but that was not really different from very good cheese on toast.

Bath, Stonehenge

We leave Cardiff early and head for Bath for lunch and a quick tour of the Roman baths and the Abbey. We only had time to do a quick tour of the baths which are in three layers, taking their water from hot springs. There is a cameo of what the Romans got up to the Calderium. Nude massage in progress but one wonders where does that all end? The Romans had statues around the top the one nearest the camera is Julius Caesar.



Stonehenge has changed drastically in the last few years. Previously it was an incomplete circle of stones standing bare in the middle of Salisbury Plain. Now there is a massive visitors Centre and a model village, a recognition that Stonehenge was not an isolated wonder but the centre of a sophisticated civilisation.

Stonehenge is at the intersection of the rising and the setting sun so it is part of a much bigger community that recent research (on SBS a few months ago) suggested started about 3,000 BC in the Mesolithic age. Stonehenge itself was built from 2,600 with Neolithic techniques and was originally a complete circle of sarsen pillars, huge hard sandstone blocks weighing 40 tonnes and transported possibly by boat from Marlborough Downs 30 miles away. Originally it comprised a circle of trilithons, a block capping two pillars, whitish in colour but now have weathered. In between were added bluestone pillars around 4 tonnes, some possibly up to 25 tonnes, which were hauled an amazing 250 miles from Pembroke in West Wales.



Latest digs using latest technology have shown that up to and into the Bronze Age, the near vicinity of Stonehenge comprised burial grounds for the then rich and locally famous. There were also connections with Durrington Walls 2 miles to the NE.

Back to what is left now, no one except self-styled druids are allowed within the circle of stones so photographs from a distance are not very informative. It being the day after the solstice the Druids' ceremonies were still ongoing. My zoom lens tried to find out what they were up to but no enlightenment. A better idea is obtained from this diagram, showing important stones remaining starting with the Heel Stone, the line of solstice alignment named various important aspects of the site. The Slaughtering Stone, a horizontal sarsen, suggested human sacrifice which may or may not have happened: although ritually killing by arrows does seem likely. Evidence for a Stonehenge in use stopped the Bronze Age, about 1,000 BC, when it became as it looks now.



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Back at the Visitors' Centre are models of Neolithic villages and models suggesting how the monoliths some weighing around 25 tons were transported.

Britain today

I had lived in England for over five years 60 years ago. Things had changed. Englishmen people for a start. Then they were shorter and thinner. The average height of men then was 5'7" now it's over 5'9", while women have grown proportionately taller than men have. I had thought Australians were obese, which 2/3rds are, but British are more obese still, particularly in low SES groups. But women who aren't, are tall and elegant. A similar thing happened in Australia, men are 8 cm taller today than 50 years ago, women the same unlike in England who are relatively taller than men. Smoking in public is far more common than in Australia, including 'vaping' or e-pipes and cigarettes, which we don't see in Australia. Yet men and women running the streets of London with professional looking fitness monitors strapped to their arms are a common sight, more so than in Hobart.

All of which is as confusing as the politics. Theresa May, like our PM, called an early election to increase her majority only to nearly lose it. She tries to look and sound like Margaret Thatcher but lacks Thatcher's ability to command and to be obeyed: May's calls to the barricades are not those of a firm leader but bespeak clueless rigidity. Jeremy Corbyn, in offering a return to the traditional

British welfare state I knew and admired, shot up like a phoenix from the ashes, hauling the Labor Party back to what is used to stand for until it was seduced by neoliberals: Blair in UK's case, Hawk-Keating in ours. Funny how Labor, not conservatives, swung governments to the right.

Where is our Jeremy Corbyn?

And for a parting shot here are Dover Castle, Dover Town and the white cliffs:

